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Jo Moran-Ellis

Children as social actors, agency, and social competence: sociological reflections for early childhood

Introduction

The study of children in early childhood has, for most of the last 100 years, been dominated by developmental perspectives. This has resulted not only in a huge body of work documenting, accounting for and theorising how children grow up (controversies notwithstanding), but has also led to early childhood being in effect ›colonised‹ by this type of science and by questions of development and change. Qvortrup (1994: 4) summed this up as a dominant focus on what children will become to the neglect of what they are as persons in their early life. This hegemonic emphasis on development has been to the detriment of understanding childhood and children's lives from a fully social scientific perspective. Until the 1990s the grip of developmental framings of the study of children and childhood left little room for sociological accounts of childhood, other than those stemming from theories of socialisation. This situation was challenged by sociological work which foregrounded an empirical sensibility towards children as social actors. This opened up a space of enquiry for understanding the social significance of the subjectivities of children and the implications of these for analyses and theorisations of both those social phenomena which are directly relevant for children and/or childhood and those which intersect with children's lives and social worlds¹. The need for this kind of sociological perspective has had its main impact via studies involving children in middle childhood, partly because of the emphasis on children's voices in the new sociology of childhood (Thorne, 2008; McNamee and Seymour, 2013) although there is some notable work on younger age children using a broader range of methodological approaches (see for example Waksler, 1991; Danby and Baker, 1998a; Clark and Moss, 2001; Warming, 2011; Di Santo and Berman, 2012).

Early childhood stands out in that it is a period of time defined by the legally regulated absence of a particular institution in children's lives: school. Thus, it is a societal construct which is quite clearly operationalized around both age (from birth) and the commencement of a social status (›school-age‹)². Nonetheless, children who are 'pre-school' are still the focus of many educational interventions and

1 Which is necessarily all phenomena in society since children are living in society from birth and hence, as for every other member of society, are directly or indirectly part of the production of those phenomena to greater or lesser extents as well as being affected, again directly or indirectly, by them. Children are never outside society.

2 The OECD (2006) defines early childhood as being the period from birth to starting compulsory schooling although this is problematic as the latter differs between countries.

policies if they spend any time in the early childhood institutions, ranging from day care centres which provide day care for children from a few months old up to school age to more formalised ›early years‹ educational settings such as kindergartens and nursery schools³. Young children's own world views and the meanings they ascribe to their interactions and experiences in these institutional settings have little status as relevant or valid knowledge in relation to these interventions and policies and hence are mostly treated as irrelevant or viewed through an evaluative lens of development theory or considerations of the socialisation process. In addition, early childhood is generally considered in Western cultures as a state suspended between nature and culture and hence not yet fully social⁴. Taken together, the emphasis on developmental and socialisation processes along with children in early childhood being ascribed the status of being between nature and culture results in their potential to be informants about their own lives being overlooked or assumed to be highly problematic from an adult perspective.

However, I argue in this paper that there is a pressing need now for a strong sociological engagement with children in the early years of their life since up until now they have largely been seen to belong to the domains of development (physical and psychological), the arena of the family, and the province of the care by parents. The need for this is pressing because in recent years early childhood has become increasingly visible to policy makers and politicians as a site for intervention in socio-political and economic respects. This is reflected in the plethora of schemes and policies developed around early child care and education, such as those to be found in the EU, in the USA, and within different specific countries which draw on developmental psychology, cognitive sciences, socialisation theories, and educational sciences. Poor and disadvantaged young children in particular have come to be seen as projects, one might even say they have come to be seen as subjects in need of rescue from poor parenting and low societal expectations, by governments and the discipline of early childhood education alike in pursuit of society level goals of economic growth and societal stability. In the light of this, sociology's contribution to understanding life as a young child becomes important both as a corrective to the over-emphasis on growing up and future prospects at the expense of insights into day to day lives, and as a counter-balance to the increasing ideological colonisation of early childhood by the interests of capitalism.

This paper addresses the question of whether the sociological argument for the legitimacy of understanding children as social actors, as set out by Prout and James (1990), can be used for the study of very young children. I explore the limitations of this approach in relation to research with children of any age, and argue that the concept of agency, as conceptualised both in childhood studies and in sociology more broadly, needs more critical reflection if it is to be of use analytically in childhood studies in general and in early childhood work in particular. I then argue that the concept of social competence (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998a; 1998b) needs to be incorporated with thinking about children as social actors and questions of agency in order to take the structural and intergenerational dynamics of children's lives

3 In the UK this can also be the nursery school which is attached to an infant/primary school and which caters for children from age 3 until they start in the formal school around the age of 5, possibly as early as 6 months prior to their 5th birthday.

4 See Latour (1993) on the question of nature-culture hybridities in modernity and Lee and Motkau (2011) on hybridity and childhood.

more strongly into account. This latter is essential for developing robust empirical evidence of young children's agency and actorship as a step prior to interpreting the implications of this for policy formation and implementation.

History of social scientific study of children and childhood

To study children and childhood would seem to necessitate a recognition of a historically and culturally shaped set of subjects and subjectivities, and of a socio-politically driven structure within society which intersects with other structures such as class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and so on. However, despite this, the social sciences that have claimed children and childhood have primarily been pedagogy and psychology. Carmen Luke (1989), in her Foucauldian inspired history of childhood, argues that the current Western concept of the child emerged first in Germany in the 16th century⁵ when religious authority (in the shape of Luther) determined the child, as a figure, and children as individuals, to be the proper subjects of a pedagogy which would enable them to attain salvation as adults. Over the ensuing three centuries, she argues, pedagogy, transformed from its emphasis on salvation by the industrial revolution and woven into the project of modern Capitalism, became orientated to the production of workers. This shift in orientation intersected with the new science of psychology to create a space within which childhood was formulated as a period of intense but systematic change which could best be dealt with by the new science of developmental psychology and the burgeoning science of education (which was also largely heavily influenced by developmental thinking). This set the stage for the description of childhood as a period of development from instinctual cognition at birth through various stages of cognitive change to maturity. Starting with Piaget (1926; 1929)⁶ in Western Europe who mapped an unfolding, natural, universal sequence of development, albeit with some links to social context (see Burman, 2008), and Vygotsky (1934/1962) in the Soviet Union who located this process of change and growth in capacities at the intersection between learning, development and environment, childhood was positioned as primarily a period of 'becoming' (Qvortrup 1994) with children's own subjectivities either sentimentalised (Zelizer, 1981) or dismissed as irrelevant.

Burman (2008) notes how the time and nature of the emergence of developmental psychology in Europe marks it as a science of the industrialised West, and how its orientation to normativity as a foundation for its empirical and theoretical work put it in a powerful position vis a vis defining the parameters and meaning of childhood. Sociology came later to the question of children, doing so primarily through the concept of socialisation which shared many common roots with developmental psychology, not least the virtually exclusive emphasis on studying children in terms

5 This sets the emergence of the beginning of a modern childhood one hundred years earlier than that established by Aries (1962) in his study of childhood in France (in the Ancient Regime). Luke attributes this largely to the persistence of Catholicism in France which positioned children in a different way to Lutheranism.

6 It is also worth mentioning J. B. Watson here who stood in some contrast to these developmental views with his emphasis on using behavioural conditioning techniques as a child rearing strategy, treating children as young adults, and rejecting ideas of instinct and internal processes of development. Watson's emphasis was on the shaping of external behaviours through processes of classical conditioning (Watson and Watson, 1928).

of the future adults they would become. So, for most of the twentieth century, the dominance of both developmental psychology and socialisation led to an almost exclusive focus in the social sciences on mapping and marking children's progress towards adult functioning and societal membership as adults. This emphasis however is not incidental. There has been a clear interplay between the format of childhood and the nature of modernity (Aries, 1962; Cunningham, 1995; Luke, 1989) and, as Hendrick (1990) and Turmel (2008) both show, measuring, charting and intervening in the physical, social, moral and intellectual growth and development of children has been axiomatic to the capitalist project of Western industrialised societies. In addition, this form of surveillance of children opened up sites through which the private family could be governed (Donzelot, 1979) via the policing gaze of the social worker, the educationalist and the health worker.

Underpinning the concept of socialisation in sociology was a concern with accounting for how children become enculturated members of society from an assumed starting point of being utterly un-civilised at birth and hence belonging solely to the realm of nature⁷. The question of how individuals come to have a relationship to wider society from an acultural starting point dominated anthropological and sociological thinking in the early part of the twentieth century. Durkheim considered this to be a foundational question although, as van de Walle notes (2008, 2011), Durkheim's conception of socialisation was a process primarily to do with the building of a specific kind of relationship between a member of society and society as authority rather than a process of individualised internalisation of culture. As Durkheim puts it:

»The child, on entering life, brings only his individual nature. Society finds itself then, with each new generation, faced with a virtually clean slate on which it must start anew. It is necessary

that...to the egoistic and asocial being just born, [society] must add another, capable of leading a moral and social life« (Durkheim cited in Lamanina, 2002: 126-7).

Parsons and Bales (1955), following Parsons' work on social systems and roles (1951), focused on developing a theory of socialisation which could account for the processes by which societies produce the ›right‹ kind of citizens: those who conform to the norms and values of the society within which they live and who are thus cultural members of the society into which they were born and in which they have grown to maturity. They set out a case for understanding socialisation as a process for which first the family (primary socialisation) and then social institutions such as schools (secondary socialisation) were responsible, and consisting of mechanisms that inculcate the internalisation of societal/cultural norms and values during childhood and adolescence. This formulation of socialisation differed from that of Durkheim in that these processes were considered to mainly involve the stabilisation of personality on the basis that human personalities are the products of cultural and social processes, not expressions of inborn essences. In Parsonian socialisation, the family is thought of as a factory in which human personality is produced and one which is essential for producing the stabilised adult personalities which are needed for society to function effectively (Parsons and Bales, 1955:16). Parsons did, however, note that whilst adult society positioned socialisation as the

⁷ James, Jenks and Prout (1998) have argued that in effect the dominance of socialisation represented a pre-sociological engagement with children since it extracted and abstracted them from society as a whole and constituted them as pre-social subjects.

core enterprise in childhood, and his theory of society placed it as the *raison d'être* for the existence of the nuclear family with strong gendered roles in industrialised societies, it was not confined to that period in the lifecourse:

»The term socialization in its current usage in the literature refers primarily to the process of child development. This is in fact a crucially important case of the operation of what are here called the mechanisms of socialization, but it should be made clear that the term is here used in a broader sense than the current one to designate

the learning of any orientations of functional significance to the operation of a system of complementary role-expectations. In this sense, socialization, like learning, goes on throughout life. The case of the development of the child is only the most dramatic because he has so far to go.« (Parsons, 1951:142)

This formulation of childhood as the prime time for socialisation and the family as the prime initial site of socialisation increased in importance in the middle part of the 20th century as concerns about the reconstruction of social order in society in the post-war years in the USA and UK intersected with anxieties about the spread of communism from Eastern bloc countries along with the politics of the Cold War.

During this period both psychology and sociology worked with the figure of the child as something of a 'tabula rasa', formulated by Durkheim as a 'clean slate', or by as an empty vessel into which the values and mores of society were poured by parents, educationalists and other credible adults. Moreover, the functionality of society is haunted by the spectre of the unsocialised individual:

»First it is quite clear that the orientations which an actor implements in his complementary interaction

in roles are not inborn but have to be acquired through learning. We may then say that before he has learned a given role-orientation he clearly tends to act in ways which would upset the equi-

librium of interaction in his incumbency in the role in question« (Parsons, 1951:141)

The dominance of socialisation as the core social process of childhood

remained even after critiques of Parsonian functionalism had made their mark on both the theory and the assumptions on which it was founded with respect to accounting for the existence of social institutions such as the family and the school (see for example Wrong, 1961; Mackay, 1973; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Stacey and Thorne, 1985). The socialisation approach to children and childhood not only retained the assumptions of functionalism with respect to the role of the family and of schools in society, but also conceptualised the child as a problem for society (a disturbance) whilst uncivilised, as indelibly marked by what is learnt in childhood, in the socialisation meaning of learning, and as a passive subject in the socialisation process. The impact of this on the study of children and childhood in sociology was considerable and it was not until the 1980s that alternative sociological perspectives were brought to bear to any great extent.

Throughout the 1990s a new body of sociological work emerged which presented strong critiques of the Parsonian conceptualisation of childhood (see for example Alanen 1988; Blitzer, 1991; Corsaro, 1993), whilst other work challenged its dominance as the primary empirical and theoretical tool for understanding children's lives and the nature of childhood as a social condition and social structure (see James and Prout, 1990; Blitzer, 1991; Waksler, 1991; Mayall 1994; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998a to cite a few). These critiques ushered in a new approach in

sociology for looking at children, one which empirically and theoretically investigated their status as active social actors and which opened up the possibility of understanding their actions as agentic rather than as the signs of development and socialisation, or lack thereof.

Key shift in sociological thinking about children – the agency agenda

This shift towards conceptualising children as social actors mounted a set of decisive challenges against the presumption of children's passivity in the process of 'growing up', and against the primacy of socialisation as the main theoretical basis for sociological engagement with children's lives (Buehler-Niederberger and Suenker, 2012). This radical move was crystallized in the UK in the publication of *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* (James and Prout, 1990), an edited collection of empirical and theoretical reconsiderations of children as social actors and their capacity to be agentic. As Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) comment, James and Prout set up two key imperatives:

»that children should be studied for and in themselves, not simply as a means of understanding the adult world or of addressing its concerns; and that researchers should be attentive to the

peculiarities and specificities of individual childhoods as geographically, historically and socially situated...« (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008: 500)

Specifically, James and Prout argued that children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Thus, children are not just passive subjects of social structures and processes but are engaged as social actors in society. What it means to be a social actor in the terms that James and Prout set out bears some examination, however, to clarify how this differs from ideas of the individual as an actor which are embedded within Parsons' concept of socialisation. In essence, the key difference is that for Parsons the status of being a social actor (with all that entails in terms of acting within the parameters of societal norms and values) is the outcome of the process of socialisation and hence is something associated with adults and not children. In this theoretical frame, whilst children obviously act and interact, this is understood scientifically in terms of the process of learning to be fully human. This frames adults as acting and children as learning. This then means that from a Parsonian perspective, children's actions are part of the material worked in socialisation and contained when successfully transformed into appropriate role-orientations (Parsons, 1951). Whilst this recognises children as actors of a sort, the social significance of their actions is neutralised through reconfiguration as raw material, evidence of individual progress in internalising societal norms and values, or indicative of the need for further learning and development. Children's actions are not seen as being of significance for society beyond this unless they imply future failure or future danger.

The proposition made by James and Prout sought to treat children's actions differently. The repositioning of children as social actors meant they should be seen as people who act with meaning and who can be agentic. James and Prout draw on interpretive sociology and its emphasis on action beyond the determination of systems of social organisation to underpin their argument more broadly:

»...it was from interpretive sociology that much of the impetus to re-examine the role of children as active meaning-producing beings came. Interpretive sociology stresses the creative production

(agency) of social life rather than the determination of social behaviour by systems of social organization...« (Prout and James, 1990:27-28)

In their approach, which became known as the new sociology of childhood in the UK⁷, the nature of being a social actor consists of being a meaning-making individual, a person who experiences and encounters the world and makes sense of it within the frame (or frames) available to them in a dynamic and personalised way. Furthermore, this meaning-making is seen as linked to how people (including children) act. On this basis, James and Prout argued that children are social actors and hence also have agency. However, this latter move in the argument for sociologically re-envisioning children is not as straightforward as it might appear. There is a degree of slippage between meaning-making, acting and agency which implies that agency can be treated as synonymous with acting. However, if this is the case then why consider agency as a distinct bounded concept? Or, if it is different, then how is it different? This question of quite what agency is has largely been left unaddressed even whilst it has been used conceptually and analytically in many studies of children from this new standpoint. In the next section I examine agency as a concept within sociology and reflect on how it needs to be conceptualised, or re-conceptualised, with respect to children.

The slippage between action and agency, and the ambiguity about what the concept encapsulates is a problem in sociology more generally. Agency has been described as something of a ›black box‹ (Emirbayer/Mische, 1998; Campbell, 2009) and a ›slippery‹ concept (Hitlin/Elder, 2007). Alexander (1992) (cited in Campbell, 2009) notes that there is often a conflation of agency and action in sociological thinking which results in the loss of distinction between behaving, acting, and being agentic. Where distinctions are drawn, agency may be specified as the »socioculturally mediated capacity to act« (Ahearn, 2001: 112) or in terms of the role of purpose, volition and intention in acting (Ritzer, 2005: 8). However, Willmott (1999: 9) argues that, whilst agency may be accepted by some as the capacity to ›do otherwise‹ through intention, the capacity to be agentic depends on the power individuals can mobilise to implement their desired goal or achieve their intention. Where structural forces are greater than the power that individual agents can mobilise, their agency may lie only in resistance to the dominant conditions (which brings its own costs) rather than in effecting change or making a difference.

Giddens' work in this area adds a further component to the nature of being an agent. Linking agency to the essence of being a human, he argues:

»To be a human being is to be a purposive agent who both has reasons for his or her activities and is able, if asked, to elaborate discursively upon those reasons...As social actors, all human be-

ings are highly ›learned‹ in respect of knowledge which they possess, and apply, in the production and reproduction of day-to-day social encounters.« (Giddens, 1984: 3;22)

His vision of what it is to be a social actor is reflected very strongly in the proposition James and Prout make and yet this further component presents some problems for early childhood studies in particular, and perhaps childhood studies

⁷ In Continental Europe and the USA this is more often coined as the new social studies of childhood to indicate multi-disciplinary approaches which start with the children-as-social-actors perspective.

more generally⁸. Taking the point about being able to ›elaborate discursively‹ upon reasons for actions: in this formulation the purposiveness in the action has to be communicable discursively; the agent must be able to account for their reasons for acting in the way they did. This presupposes particular cognitive and linguistic capacities along with some degree of reflexivity. The agent must have decided on certain actions for some purpose that they can share with another. This would seem to limit agency to being a property of certain cognitive and linguistic maturity and so rule out preverbal children or others for whom this is problematic. Since Giddens links this to the nature of being human, the logical extension of this position would be that those who lack these capacities are other than human. We can see here how Giddens' conceptualisation of the human being is predicated on the figure of an adult who has both intention and power to act – the figure of the rational, accountable individual in modernity. If these conceptualisations of agency are right, then children are placed outside the field of agency and human ›being-ness‹ if and when their actions are not perceived to be intentional or they are perceived to lack the capacity to ›act otherwise‹ whether that be through lack of cognitive capacity and/or lack of social imagination. The claim of childhood studies about children's agency potentially stands in fundamental tension with this conceptualisation of agency in Giddens' sociology since if we accept agency as being at the heart of being human, then for the shift to thinking about children as ›human beings‹ from positioning them primarily as ›human becomings‹ (to use Qvortrup's phrase) to be convincing it must be possible that children can also be agents. Furthermore, if agency involves purposive action, then children's actions have to be discernible as having a purpose, and if it also involves making some change in a situation, that change needs to be both observable and reliably linked to the action. But to what extent is it necessary that the actor(s) be able to explain what they are doing? I.e. to what extent is Giddens' discursive component critical for the condition of being agentic? If that requirement is removed, is it still possible to empirically observe children acting purposively and effectively, even in the case of children in their early years?

The answer to these questions is a simple yes. And that yes applies at even quite young ages. Over the period since James and Prout published their 1990 edited collection there has been a wealth of empirical literature documenting and analysing children's actions and interactions (in recent times see for example Olli et al, 2012, and see also multiple issues of the journals *Childhood* and *Children and Society*) and generating analyses which support classing children as individuals who have the capacity to be agentic, and are demonstrably exercising agency in their everyday worlds at even quite young ages. The only barrier then is the question of whether young children, say those between the ages of 2 and 5 years of age can act with purpose in a discernible way. An example is instructive here: Lam and Pollard (2006) analysed two children's engagement, or rather lack of engagement, with a teaching task in kindergarten:

⁸ And would also have significant repercussions for disability studies in relation to adults and children with communication difficulties.

»Both of these children were reluctant to do pre-writing exercises. They avoided it by putting the exercises to the bottom of their priority during activity time until the teachers ›caught‹ them. When the teachers addressed them individually, they avoided it by drifting around pretending to get the pre-writing exercises from the shelf...

Throughout the year, they eventually mastered the skills [that the pre-writing exercises were designed to support – JME] but they were among the last few children to finish the pre-writing exercises. This example shows that these children... were active, creative and strategic practitioners in the classroom.« (Lam and Pollard, 2006: 135)

Here it is possible to see that the ability to elaborate discursively is not at stake for the children's intention and purpose to be discernible through analysis of their patterned actions which looks at the content, outcomes and effects of their actions. I would argue that this example shows that Giddens' discursive element is in effect a weak proxy for the need to know an actor's intentions and purpose in order to interpret the nature of action. By broadening our methodological perspectives, we can utilise ways of understanding and discerning intention and goals which do not rely on participants being able to verbally account for themselves.

There are two other components in this example which are of relevance for the question of children's agency in particular settings: 1. the children managed their agentic actions without disturbing or challenging the formal social ordering of the kindergarten, i.e. they did not get in to trouble for their actions, and 2. they mobilised material resources in the setting such as moving materials around to simulate the action the teacher required. We can deduce from 1 that the children were aware of, or took into account, the formal pedagogical order of the setting, and from 2 that they were aware of what the teacher-desired action looked like on the surface. These skills have also been amply demonstrated by Waksler (1991) and Danby and Baker (1998a, 1998b) – I discuss the latter in more detail below.

A further dimension to their agency is that of scale. The purposive action of the children took place within the small scale setting of the kindergarten. Deciding on an action or set of actions to achieve a goal is inevitably a contextual and contingent event. The context was that of the classroom setting, and the children's capacity to be agentic was contingent on being able to circulate round the space of the classroom and determine their own priorities within activity time. The coming together of these with the temporal dimension enabled them to subvert the agenda of the teacher (the doing of the pre-writing exercises). The scope of their observable agency was limited to that activity within that setting and so we cannot conclude anything about other settings without other empirical work. For children both scale and scope are strongly limited by the structural and institutional conditions of childhood and by inter-generational power relations⁸. Whilst these are specific to the structural conditions of being a child, they also parallel those which operate in the structural and institutional conditions of adult lives. In addition, children's capacity for agency is limited or thwarted by the same constraints which operate in adult lives. For both adult and child, the capacity to be agentic is a product of the interplay between individual desires and the exercise of power and authority by other actors, including institutional actors.

8 Given the embodied nature of agency, analyses should also take account of how physical embodied features of being a child may be relevant as constraints on agency or, indeed, operate as facilitators of childhood agency. See Prout (2000) and James (2000) on the issue of embodiment, self, and agency in childhood.

Other work supports the proposition that children can be meaning-makers and act with purpose at earlier points in their lives. Cremin and Slatter (2004) explored what 3 and 4 year olds thought about their day care whilst Forrester (2002) analysed 2 year olds' constructions of childhood and the meaning with which they imbue this construct in their everyday conversations.

Whilst empirical work such as the work of Lam and Pollard above goes a long way towards demonstrating the ways in which young children can be agentic without being asked or required to account for their actions, there is another point that needs addressing. This is the tendency in childhood studies to treat agency as an internal property of the self. This tendency is problematic because it fails to take fully into account the interactional power relations and institutional power relations within which any act is embedded. Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (1998a) sought to address this particular problematic by treating agency as a property of interactional relations in material settings.

Agency and social competence

Hutchby and Moran-Ellis framed agency as an interactional accomplishment and hence as a situated event produced by the dynamic between individuals, the power relations pertaining in that situation, and the resources which are effectively mobilised by the different actors in the course of the interaction:

»...children's social competence is a constantly negotiated dynamic, a phenomenon which is stabilized, to a greater or lesser degree, in and through the interactions between human actors and the material and cultural resources which are available and which can be recruited to play a part in the constitution of specific, situated activities«. (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998b: 15)

Clarifying this, they argue that competence is not an inherent characteristic of children in general or a child in particular, rather it

»...has more to do with children's ability to manage their social surroundings, to engage in meaningful social action within given interactional contexts.« (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998b: 16)

The term ›social competence‹ encompasses being culturally and socially skilled in interaction, and able to act with reference to the rules and precepts of a social ordering in a setting, whether that is the form of compliance, subversion, resistance or appropriation. For this it is necessary to be a social actor, ie a meaning-making human being but this is not sufficient. Social competence allows for the possibility that whilst a child may be a social actor who is designing their actions to achieve particular purposes, they may nonetheless not succeed in attaining the effects they desire – ie they may or may not be agentic. Agency then is an accomplishment, achieved through interaction not a property possessed by the individual. When children act in strategic ways as actors and agents and their actions reflect, and maintain or create, social orderings, they are being socially competent even if they are not able to change the situation they are in. They are demonstrably ›acting otherwise‹ but the effect of their actions may be neutralised, over-ruled or successfully opposed by another. Social competence and agency are always linked to the interactional contexts in which the children are present, their interactions with the other people who are part of the fabric of the interaction, and to the resources that can be mobilised at the time either in directly material ways or rendered relevant through talk and allusion. This means that the form of social competence and agency may

be mediated by the personal resources that are available to the child at different points in their development, but they being agentic is not primarily dependent on attaining a particular level of development. This is not to deny or relativise cognitive or other developmental differences between adults and children, rather the excision of the relevance of an individual's developmental capacity means the question of what is going on in social interaction is answered through analyses of the use made of language resources, material objects and embodied capacities to be social actors who engage in purposive action which has social consequences, along with a recognition of the role and distribution of intergenerational power in the interaction. The social competence approach places a priority on understanding agentic action as a situated practical phenomenon which takes place at the everyday level and which involves social actors concerned with the accomplishment of their intentions. An analysis of children's interactions and their social competence must thus take account not only of the interaction but also of the materials (resources) which are enrolled in the interaction by any and all of the parties involved. This brings to the fore the dynamic of the interaction and also the relevance of socio-historical contexts for both the form of the interactions and the material resources which are used.

There are some key pieces of research which show how children have much greater levels of social competence than adults normally acknowledge, but that how this is transformed into being agentic depends on the particular constellation of competency skills, social and physical resources available to the child, as well as the structural power relations in which their interactions are embedded at any one particular time and in any one particular arena. Hence, children may be able to exercise agency in one setting but not in another, and may be able to draw on certain resources to support their agentic efforts at one time but not at another. Below I illustrate this using an exemplary study.

Research using the agency and social competence approach with young children

A study in a nursery setting by Danby and Baker shows how children can navigate their way between different social orders as skilled social actors, deploying and mobilising a range of resources to 'act with purpose' in and in pursuit of ›acting otherwise‹ to the dominant order. Thus children pursue their own social orderings and meaning-making at times when they are out of direct gaze of the teacher in the classroom. As Danby and Baker argue (1998b) in respect of the limitations of traditional pedagogical approaches to the importance of children's play:

Young children are routinely propelled into play situations where they are sometimes out of sight and out of earshot of the teachers. What goes on in those play situations is the very serious work of constructing social order (Denzin, 1982;

Goodwin, 1985 and 1990). On close inspection this work turns out to be intricate and itself orientated to a recognition that there is more than one social order to manage. (Danby and Baker, 1998b: 157)

Noting that what children are able to achieve is constrained by the structural and material features of a setting such as the presence of adults who intervene in children's interactions, they go on to argue that their own empirical study of children's interactions in the nursery setting shows »how children make use of such structural features (the possibility and the fact of teacher intervention) as material

for their work of social organisation« (p157). In their detailed study of children's interactions in the space of the nursery class, drawing on conversation analysis of video-recorded episodes, they found that when a child was upset within some peer interactions (such as whilst playing ›cars‹ or ›mummies and daddies‹) the teacher identified the crying child as the problem that needed solving via restoring good relations between the playing children, apportioning responsibility for the creation of the upset, and insisting on reconciliation actions by the ›guilty parties‹ such as an apology to the upset child by one or more of the other children involved or asking them to comfort the crying child with a hug. The final closure of the problem would come with the teacher insisting the children ›play nicely‹ and include the upset child in the game. However, Danby and Baker propose that this is the problem from the teacher's point of view, based on an »expectation of cooperation and harmony existing in the early childhood classrooms« (p182).

From the point of view of the children's social orders the problem is more complex. In one episode of interactions between three boys – Connell, David and John – Connell started to cry following a conflict about whether he could join in the play of the other two in a specific area of the nursery. Connell's crying caused the teacher to come to the scene and intervene in the interaction. She sought to solve the problem of Connell crying and restore harmony in the group. However after she left the scene, the boys performed their own work to restore the within-group social order which consisted of a reassertion by David, out of hearing of the teacher, that he is the biggest and has more rights to be there than the others who are younger than him. David and John also resisted the caring work which the teacher tried to get them to perform for Connell in the course of her intervention. Put succinctly, what Danby and Baker observed was that although the teacher intervened in this and other events to restore harmony, once she left the scene the children acted out their own solutions to the upset through either repeating the teacher initiated care work but in a slightly different form, or by reasserting the prior conditions of the interaction but without creating further upset and hence without becoming visible to the teacher. Danby and Baker conclude that the children's carefully choreographed actions after the teacher is out of the interaction strongly indicates that there is a »...disjunction between children's social order and that of the teacher.« (p181).

Whilst conditions of being a social actor and being agentic are fairly well established now for children in middle childhood, the persistent dominance of socialisation and developmentalist perspectives in early childhood tends to divert our attention away from the agentic nature of their actions, their position as social actors, and the various resources, including talk, that they mobilise in support of the purposes of their interactions. This is partly a lack of recognition of ›what is going on‹ in young children's interactions. If the children are not understood as social actors, this leads to an ideological downgrading of the legitimacy of certain forms of resources that children might deploy such as crying, and the hegemonic interpretation of children's action as the product of, or material for, developmental processes and/or the project of socialisation. Sewell (1992), however, argues that all members of society, however »destitute or oppressed« have some resources, be they human or non-human – which they can mobilise for themselves and that »...part of what it means to conceive of human beings as agents is to conceive of them as empowered by access to resources of one kind or another« (p7). Taking this rubric, the empirical and theoretical questions we need to pose in respect of young children are

not only what kinds of social actorship are in play in particular interactions, what kinds of social competence are being deployed in pursuit of or resistance to which social orders, whose social order is prevailing, but also what kinds of resources are the actors in the setting deploying in pursuit of their own agency? These questions encompass all the actors in the setting, children and adults, and the setting itself. The role of development and socialisation processes will be relevant only in as far as they are rendered relevant by the actors and in that the setting.

Discussion – relevance for policy and early childhood

The starting point of this paper was the question of how the reframing of children as social actors and the investigation of their capacity to be agentic could be applied to children in the early years of their life. I argued that this was an important question since in general the lives of young children are still largely researched and theorised through the dominant paradigms of developmentalism, familialism, and socialisation. These dominant discourses and perspectives leave the sociological domains of young children's lives unexplored and unaccounted for. Applying the concepts of ›social actor‹ and ›agency‹ to early childhood does however require a close examination of what these concepts encapsulate in order to assess their relevance and adequacy with respect to the lives of young children. In elaborating the concept of agency as it is formulated by Giddens for example, it becomes apparent that it cannot be imported ›wholesale‹ into a sociology of early childhood and that the question of social competence is highly important. The determination of whether an action is purposive must be established through robust empirical work as must the nature of that action, the place and meaning of its performance within the social orderings(s) of the setting(s), and the consequences of it. This is no different to what is needed with any other group of social actors to explore questions of their capacities to be agentic within all the structural conditions in which they live and act. Young children, however, may be subject to far greater structural limitations than many other groups in society through three mechanisms: one is the nature of the institutionalisation of their lives; the second is the dominance of intergenerational relationships which position them as developmental actors and hence reposition their actions as material for learning and correcting; the third is their limited access to resources they can mobilise in support of their own intentions – the question of scope and scale of the contexts within which they can be agentic. That said, I argue that there is compelling empirical evidence of the capacity of young children to be socially competent in highly complex and socially ordered ways, and within settings which operate multi-level social orderings, along with evidence of the significance of structural limitations of this capacity in the different settings in which they live. It is the intersection of these which constitutes the success or failure of individual children in respect of their agency. Recognition of this allows for a sociological understanding of them as social actors and the significance of their position within a range of social structurings.

Having made this case, what are the implications for policy and practice? The social actor and social competence approach open up opportunities for incorporating children's own perspectives on their lives into policy and intervention, allowing for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the problems with which policy and practice are concerned in respect of young children. For example, the recent

emphasis on early childhood education and care in a European context lacks the insights that the work of Evans and Fuller (1998), Stephen (2003), Stephenson (2009) and Cremin and Slater (2004) would contribute via their study of children's perceptions of their nursery schools and their experiences in day care; similarly policy on poverty would benefit from a better understanding of how being poor is experienced in the lives of children in the kindergarten (Ridge, 2011), and research on children's own perspectives on their wellbeing such as that done by Crivello et al (2009) makes a very positive addition to policy development and the analysis of social problems. Gillespie (2012) has shown how the inclusion of children in urban planning enhances not only the planning but theoretical understandings of urban spaces and places.

More challengingly, Marchant (2013) argues the case for children as young as two years old being able to give evidence in court proceedings where they have been the victims of violence and/or sexual exploitation or witnesses to it. Finally, the work from the field of disability studies also provides a valuable corrective to assumptions about the prior need for children to have certain kinds of linguistic cognitive skills before they can be social actors or their actions can be understood within frames of social competence and agency. Of particular note is the work of Davies (1998) who researched the meanings of children with learning disabilities, Badham (2004) with respect to children's contributions to setting research agenda. As is evident, there has been much work with young children and creative methods have been employed to explore their experiences, their perspectives, their status as social actors, and their deployment of social competences and agentic goals. Nonetheless, it still seems to remain the case that convincing arguments have to be made each time against the silencing that comes with the application of developmentalist thinking.

Finally, an example of the direct application of research findings into policy recommendations can be found with the work of Connolly et al (2002) who explored the cultural and political awareness of children aged between three years old and six in Northern Ireland. They found that it was crucial to encourage children from the age of three years »to appreciate and respect difference and cultural diversity« (p6), with work on addressing negative sectarian stereotypes and prejudices being important for children from the age of five onwards.

Conclusions

The idea of children as agentic needs careful treatment to ensure that research allows for the interplay of intergenerational orders, of other power relations, and of the effect of structural conditions. To this end a notion of social competence may be of use as is the concept of agency if it is taken as a way of conceptualising purposive action, without the need for discursive accounting by the individual social actor. Our approaches need to recognise that whilst modernist perspectives on childhood may locate the child somewhere between nature and culture, children are acting, being and living in the social world from the start of their lives and our research methods need to start from that point.

Although always suspended as an empirical question, the agency and social competence perspectives create a climate in which children's experiences of the world gain an added impetus not only for understanding particular phenomena in a more comprehensive way but also for incorporating children's lives as they are

experienced by children in the present time into the plans and actions devised to improve their

lives and the conditions of the whole of society.

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